

Excerpts from the Novel
Point Blank

by Carmine Sarracino

Author's explanatory note:

The two main characters of *Point Blank* are Louisa March and Cole Morgan. Louisa is a nurse (modeled closely on Louisa May Alcott) in a hospital in Washington, DC, just after the battle of Fredericksburg, and Cole is a badly wounded Union soldier from a New York regiment, brought to the same hospital, where, as nurse and patient respectively, they slowly strike up a romance. While still in Concord, she had borrowed *Leaves of Grass* from Emerson's library, and brought it with her to Washington. In this scene, I depict Louisa March reading it, simultaneously repelled and attracted. She then loans the book to Cole, who has been a devotee of Emerson's writing and has had mystical experiences of transcendence, which, to his astonished delight, he finds described in *Leaves of Grass*. In the second excerpt, I imagine that Walt might indeed have visited the hospital himself. In a short conversation, Cole almost—but not quite—makes the connection between this graybeard nurse and the writer of the book that fascinates him.

Slowly, Louisa rose from her bed and sat at the small table. Reading would help her settle for sleep, it always did. On the table lay a book borrowed from Mr. Emerson's library, one that had attracted her by its unusual green covers. The book proved to be in every way an anomaly, an intriguing mystery. Was it poetry? The lines sprawled everywhere and did not scan or rhyme. The spine bore no author's name, nor did the title page. And she read there utterances such as she had never read anywhere else.

*Through me the forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts...voices veiled, and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured.
I do not press my finger across my mouth,
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.
I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing hearing and feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from;
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer...*

"What?" she had said aloud when she first read the last line, and she plopped the book on her lap incredulously. This, and other such proclamations—indecent and blasphemous—made her blush at every reading.

She felt offended at his rudeness, but she couldn't help giggling at the pure mischief of it. She always did love mischief.

Still, it was base.

Yet she read it over. It was so stunningly...original. And, after all, the scent of armpits...she couldn't finish the thought. But she smiled. And then pursed her lips to erase the smile.

It was not before this page, page twenty-nine—and only here—that the author in fact revealed his name:

Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,

Disorderly fleshy and sensual...eating drinking and breeding...

He at times angered her as she read. But he delighted her too. There was something profound in this strange book. The poet seemed fully awake. Alive as few people are ever alive. So confident, so bold, so independent of the opinion of the world.

Louisa had taken the book on Mr. Emerson's open invitation to his library, and signed in a ledger on his desk that she had done so. She was glad that she had not mentioned the book before withdrawing it, for he surely would have objected and likely withheld it.

She picked it up from the desk and absently held it in her lap, thinking of Cole. Louisa had mentioned lending him a book, *Walden*, and wondered what he would make of this one, this *Leaves of Grass*. But it would be an embarrassment to admit she had read it.

And Dr. Holt—oh, dear, Dr. Holt—no, decidedly not Dr. Holt. He was the very last person to whom she would pass along *Leaves of Grass*.

But Cole might like it. There were certainly wonderful parts of it. Studying Oriental literature, Cole had an adventurous mind. He was idealistic, very much like most of the fellows drawn to Mr. Emerson, and drawn as well to her father. But unlike most of them, he was not, well, *silly*.

She opened the big green covers and looked at the lithograph of the author. Standing with his hands on aslant hips, a workingman's shirt open at the collar, hat cocked at a jaunty angle. *One of the roughs*, indeed. Who was this scandalous man? Was he in Concord? Or, might he even have passed—among the crowd of artists and eccentrics—through her father's commune?

She tilted her head, and he reminded her of Cole. However idealistic, spiritual, and literary, he was also physical, earthy.

As Cole gradually gained weight and strengthened, she saw the physique he'd developed from working farm chores all his life. Unlike the aesthetes and philosophers at Fruits of Eden, her father's commune, he would know cows from oxen and wheat from oats, and how to plant a field and work it, spreading copiously the manure they fussed off their soft fingers.

For a moment she remembered the Brothers and Sisters on the commune, in the fields in their flaxen shirts and dresses, sailing from one botched farm chore to the next. Smiling seraphically, they dismissed every shriveled crop, every stunted orchard, as the will of Providence.

Renouncing money, some offered sermons in exchange for ferry rides. One brother, who believed that words didn't matter if the spirit was right, greeted everyone with "Good morning, damn you." Another, to free his emotions completely, climbed trees and shouted his happiness to the skies or rolled in the dirt and wept. A fiddler played whenever so moved, at times jumping up from his bed in the middle of the night.

They were endearing lunatics all. And fortunate. They might have been locked up in asylums but instead had come together on an idyllic farm where they imagined they were founding a New World.

But the war changed Louisa's view of them. Their silliness no longer amused her. Drums beat loud. Bugles called the brave to shed their blood to end the curse of slavery. And to continue the nation's great experiment in liberty—a liberty so complete that fools might pursue silliness. So be it. Let them sail about their utopia in flaxen robes.

Let all choose as they may. The fools, the wise, and all in between—white and black—would enjoy that most blessed and vexing human right, *the pursuit of happiness*. And female the same as male—that day was dawning too. Never before did any political document in all of history even recognize the pursuit of happiness as a human right. For one and all.

Now the words came to her. As usual, too late. Another time, perhaps, she would explain herself to Cole. So that he might understand why at this juncture in her life there was no other place for her but this Army hospital ward, tending the wounded. Giving back to them the strength they needed to save this great experiment.

Louisa shut the book and closed her eyes. So, she had answered the bugle's call. Though at times—tonight—she felt wholly unsuited. Rising from her chair, she stretched out on the bed again without undressing or pulling down the covers.

*I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
barestript heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.*

Cole reread the passage from *Leaves of Grass* by the light of his bedside lamp, stirred as he had not been since reading R. W. Emerson's descriptions of mystical experience. He returned to this passage again and again. At first reading it seemed indecent. Louisa read *this*? From the library of Mr. Emerson? But when he read it a

second time, he saw that the entire section was addressed to the soul—not literally to a lover, but metaphorically to the soul as a “lover”.

*I believe in you my soul...the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.*

The soul was a “lover.” Cole understood that from his own experiences.

*Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all
the argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own....*

But who could understand the profound meaning of this passage without such experiences? And without such understanding—how crudely would it be misunderstood?

One morning a few years before the outbreak of the war, Cole had taken a walk at dawn through autumn woods just beyond a cow pasture. Returning home, exhilarated from the walk, he sat on the floor of the front porch, leaning against the clapboards. The sun rose just above the tree line, the sky a widening brightness, spreading outward moment by moment. Cole closed his eyes and felt a perfect stillness within, undisturbed by any thoughts. Then his motionless body seemed to dissolve away, like smoke in open air.

His breath softened and slowed. He heard crows in their early morning chortling and muttering, heard the last dry leaves shake in the red oaks, a cow low in the distance, but all seemed enclosed within him, wrapped in an expanding silence.

Then his fine breathing altogether stopped. It did not stop abruptly, cut off, but rather as if small out-breaths poured into smaller in-breaths. And then out-breaths into still smaller in-breaths. Finally, like a faintly rocking cradle balancing, his breathing leveled, neither in nor out, perfectly still.

As his breathing suspended, a light appeared around his closed eyes and forehead, a pure white luminescence that flickered, flickered, and then shone steadily and brightly. His face turned slightly upward, he basked in its radiance. His back was very erect, no longer touching the clapboards.

The light continued expanding, and he was absorbed into its immensity. What he experienced then was not pleasure. Not happiness. Not joy. He could not find a word for it. Later, in the *Upanishads* he came upon the word “bliss.” That was it.

For days afterward, he felt intoxicated but more clear and sane than ever. His mother and father looked askance at him, so persistent was his grinning. Whenever he was free of chores, he went off into the woods by himself for no apparent reason, and they shrugged.

In the woods he sat with eyes closed under a tree or at the top of a hill, waiting—as this poet put it—for his *soul*. Like a lover to an assignation. Bliss was as real and tangible as the pleasure of procreative release. But far more fulfilling.

Cole wished he could meet another human being who would completely understand. R.W. Emerson. Or this poet. Unlike the impossibly distant and long gone Indian sages, someone such as these living Americans. He held the book open at page 29, where he found his name. Walt Whitman. “Walt,” not “Walter.” Already a friend, from the start.

Emerson was in Concord. Cole would travel there to meet him one day. The poet Whitman...was in New York somewhere. Perhaps after this war was over he could search him out.

“Here’s one,” Willy said from the next cot. “Mr. Morgan?”

“Go ahead, Willy,” Cole said.

“E-v-a-n- oh wait, I lost my...Here it is—gosh, it’s a long one—e-v-a-n-e-s-c-e-n-t?”

“Evanescient,” Cole said. “It means temporary...fleeting. Quickly passing.”

“Oh, why, that makes perfect sense,” Willy said. “Evanescient. That’s a long one.”

“Yes, it is a long one,” Cole said. “It means fleeting, and yet it is long.”

“E-van-es-cent,” Willy said, counting off the syllables on his thumb and fingers. “Four.”

“That is exactly right,” said the white-haired, white-bearded nurse who had in an earlier visit given Cole tobacco, stepping between their cots. “Four syllables. That was excellent. You should take the prize for that one.” Willy sat up in his cot as the nurse pawed around in a large paper sack.

“The prize?”

“I might perhaps have just the thing.” He withdrew *The Boy’s Own Book* and handed it to Willy. “I found this just for you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Willy said, and immediately began leafing through the slightly worn little book. “Games and puzzles.” He giggled.

“Such big windows and not a draft of air.” He turned back and looked at Cole’s chart. His ruddy face brightened. “Ah, yes—I remember now—cut plug. How was it?”

“First rate, sir. Thank you.”

“The 151st New York. My brother serves in the 51st New York,” he said to Cole. “He was wounded at Fredericksburg as well, so I traveled here to find him.” He reached into the sack and withdrew an orange, which he handed to Cole. “But as it turned out, the wound was minor,” he brushed a finger across his cheek, “and he never left his regiment.”

“Oh, and chemical experiments,” Willy said, turning pages. “Chemistry, too, by golly.”

“But you have remained here,” Cole said.

“Yes, I have remained here. I couldn’t do it—couldn’t leave you boys. I’m too garrulous, I suppose. I love the palaver and camaraderie.” He gripped the back of a bedside chair. “When noone is looking,” he said with a grin, “you may use this to ‘open’ one of those huge windows.”

“Thank you, again,” Cole said with a laugh, “I’ll tell them that you were the instigator.” He gave the orange a little toss. “I’ll be marching with your brother again soon. Who knows but we may meet.”

“George Whitman is his name. Tell him you met his old brother. And no more blocking Rebel fire with your limbs, now.” The nurse shook Cole’s hand. His eyes were clear blue, bright, and held one as firmly as his handshake. “You may meet George. Who knows? Life is surprise.”

Cole was about to ask his first name, but at that moment Willy said, “This book is

hunky-dory, sir. Much obliged.”

“You are welcome, Willy. Mind the chemicals,” tapping the book. “Careful what you mix with what. We have enough of explosions, eh? We don’t want your young life to be *evanescent*.” He tousled Willy’s hair.

“George Whitman,” Cole said. “I’ll tell him you cared for me—and my young partner—in a Washington hospital.”

The nurse turned back to him, “You will be out of the hospital before the rounds bring me back here again,” he said. “The two of you are looking quite healthful.” He **put his hand on a chair and said**, “Next sunny day, toss this through a window.” Then, with a little wave, “Captain George Washington Whitman. Company K.” He ambled down the ward with his sack of oranges, jam, plugs of tobacco, writing paper, stamps, stopping at every cot to give a little gift.

It was not until after supper, as he peeled the orange, that Cole thought, *George Whitman from New York*. He wished he had asked if the graybeard knew a poet, a “Walt” of the same surname. But then he dismissed the likelihood.

Farfetched. He chewed a wedge so juicy it spilled down his chin.